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Harry of Jameson's Raid (1895)

[André Narbonne](#)

It was the bluebottles he'd remember for the rest of his life. A dozen or more descending on the body, the sound of their feast would stick in his throat.

Two days earlier, on the road to the Transvaal, the sergeant told a story about a Greek king who hated his home and wanted to explore. "He'd been around the whole world—mind, the whole world as he knew it, but he knew that there was more. He'd spent twenty years traveling and fighting. Some narrow escapes with cannibals and giants. Mind, that's what gets you. The times when you're an inch from death but survive. It scares you, and then you want to get closer, closer than an inch. Do you understand? You have to keep going back to those chances, and they're out there somewhere, but they're never at home."

The sergeant had a Newcastle-Upon-Tyne accent, Geordie—broad and guttural—and a strange posture. He rode high in the saddle as though daring a bullet to find him. A lot of the men rode that way, especially the ones born in England. Harry deduced that it was an English thing. The two hundred irregulars slouched in their saddles.

"Now you have to understand all this," the sergeant continued, "or you won't make sense of what Alfred, Lord Tennyson is saying with his blank verse."

*It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.*

His voice, when he recited, was iambic and beat the metre with the plodding stop-clop of a man walking on a wooden leg.

At dusk there was a quiet house on a low hill where they stopped. Six hundred men in all at a single well. Ambassadors of law.

A boy greeted them.

"Where's your father?" asked a constable with a thick moustache that concealed his pencil-thin lips, but the boy only shrugged. He was blonde, blue eyed, with full lips, Aryan-looking with broad shoulders and the large hands of a farmer's son.

"Your father," said the sergeant. "We need to know where he is." Off his horse and away from his high-flown posture, the sergeant seemed to walk on stilts. Harry observed that he never bent his knees. Some of the other men walked this way—an English thing, but why?

The sergeant mopped his brow. It was the end of December and the summer was in full furnace. Between dramatic monologues and ballads—"Ulysses," "The Lady of Shallot," who, in the sergeant's telling, broke a mirror with her shoulder when she turned too quickly to gaze at a passing knight—between poetry and exegesis, the sergeant had cursed the land, the heat, the Dutch. He seemed to like the Germans.

"The Queen is of German decent," he had confided when the police column first left Pitsani, as though Victoria's genealogy were an important secret that unlocked the riddle of their present purpose. "We're going to free our British Uitlanders without leaving our horses! Once we ride into Johannesburg and establish order, the Germans will take our side. You watch."

But all day the land held an eerie stillness. It was waiting.

Harry walked to the boy and caressed the child's chin. He was maybe twelve and already showed the musculature of a life of labour. Both the man and the boy had the same full lips.

"Where's your father?" Harry asked in flawless Afrikaans.

"He went with the other men."

Harry interpreted for the sergeant and the constable who looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Are you one of them?" cried the sergeant. "A bloody Boer?"

He shook his head. "No. My mother is Dutch, but my father is English."

"Eh?"

"My mother's name is Peters, my father's is Short. Had it been the other way, I would be with the men, too... wherever they are. But it's the father's name that counts here."

That evening Harry wrote a note that he would keep in the pocket of his shirt and that should be mailed to Cape Town in the event of his death, which now seemed likely. It was addressed to Margaret Roll, the daughter of a prosperous doctor, whose family was too good for him. That was why he'd joined this fool's mission, not to save labourers or conquer gold fields—anyone literate enough to read the newspaper could know their real purpose—but to be a war hero. It was the only way he, a poor boilermaker, would be rich enough for Margaret. He didn't know what he would write when he first touched pen to paper. He let the words find themselves.

My Dearest Margaret,

Your receiving this means my spirit is free. It knows the universe, now, and it knows God. And I am writing to tell you not to worry. I am free from pain and only pitiable for what I miss because I am dead. More than anything else, I miss you. And I will not stay with the mystery although it will bring me great joy. I will return and you will know me. Whenever a smile lifts you and you don't know why, that will be my spirit caressing your heart. Because when all the joys are

revealed, you will still be my greatest joy.
Harry

The next day the column pushed further. The land was dry, the grass brown, parched for a drink of the winter rain that fell in June. The clouds were mares-tails and offered no shade. It took until lunch for the sergeant to recover from the treachery of Harry's language and launch back into "Ulysses":

"Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'..." His voice, prepared to plod a two-step dance, tripped over uncertain feet.

"Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades

For ever and for ever when I move."

Maybe there was more. He swallowed and coughed and stopped to explain.

"Can you understand the sentiment? In your mixed language it must be difficult to feel the power of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's words."

History, said the sergeant in a voice that recalled for Harry a schoolboy repeating a lesson he dimly understood, was a conduit that opened into more passages, and the passages snaked upwards into the air and downward through water, mud, earth. The passages shaped you as you went through them and, as you passed, the ones you neglected disappeared. Not at first. They lingered for a while. They had voices that called you back like subtle sirens. Every choice and avenue freed you from the labyrinth of the past, from the voices that had never known bodies and enclosed you in the maze of now. That was what the sergeant thought. "Mind, 'Every noble work is at first impossible.' Carlyle."

Harry didn't grasp the connection. Anyway there was a different Tennyson poem that Harry knew—much to the sergeant's surprise:

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

The sergeant slapped his knee. "'The Charge of the Light Brigade'! How do you know that?"

"When I was a child, my father read Tennyson to me. And Browning..."

"Monster! Destroyed poetry. Morbid pervert."

Harry shrugged. "But what do you think of Tennyson's brigade? They had six hundred men, too."

“Yes, a wonderful poem. All about duty. ‘Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die.’”

“They charged the wrong guns. They were cut down by the cannon.”

“And their glory will never die. Splendid! You are an Englishman! Do you know this one? ‘It is an everlasting duty, the duty of being brave. Valor is still value. The first duty for a man is still that of subduing Fear.’ Carlyle, again.”

But Harry didn’t know Carlyle.

The Boers were ready. They waited twenty miles from Johannesburg. At first they skirmished, then they withdrew. Leander Starr Jameson, a politician and no tactician, tried to flank an army that was no longer there. They waited for his six hundred men at Doornkop.

That’s where Harry saw the flies. He had burrowed a small hole and made himself small to its shape. The Boers rained an accurate fire on the exposed men. One by one, they dropped. The sergeant lay facedown beside him on the earth where he had fallen from his horse. Harry observed the streak of blood on the seat of the sergeant’s trousers. Saddle sores. The blood had soaked though the worsted wool. This was no rider. None of them were.

The sound of the flies burrowing into the sergeant’s body damned them.

2

When Margaret was young, she fell down the stairs at her boarding school in Cape Town. She lay on the bottom step in a heap. The headmistress was summoned and arrived in a panic. “Oh no,” she quivered. “Not the doctor’s daughter! How did it happen?”

She lifted Margaret and brought her to her bed all the while interviewing the cooing girls who walked beside her, all the while searching for a culprit. But there was no one, no one to sacrifice for her injuries, which seemed serious. Margaret had tripped on her own nightdress. She moaned. Her spine seemed wrong—bent. The headmistress, who knew surprisingly little about medicine, knew something about contingency. She kept Margaret from her parents until the end of term, hoping Margaret’s back would straighten on its own. It didn’t. By the time Margaret’s father became aware of the injury, it was permanent. He fit her with a very uncomfortable girdle, but the curvature could not be corrected, and she was left with a permanent hump in her back. Nothing could dissuade the doctor from his treatment, which he administered with a vengeance. He would have girdled God to punish him for this treachery. Over the years, Margaret realized that only one thing would save her from the agony of her father’s medicine: marriage.

But who would want a humped-back wife?

She was nineteen and had good hair, which she brushed often.

3

When Harry was ten, he witnessed an aged farm labourer cull an unwanted puppy from an unexpected litter, watched the man dangle a Boerboel by its hind legs over a waterless well.

“Don’t!” cried Harry, but the man, who had drunk himself into a sadistic humour, did. The sound of the dog’s fractured landing, its plaintive wail, fueled the labourer’s laughter. Maybe it was the residue of family grief or the sense of his exclusion from the world that drove Harry to act. Only a year earlier, he had survived the house fire that killed his parents and was handed off into a small community near Port Alfred to an English uncle who regarded him as a half-breed half-relation.

“Why did you do that? How could you?”

The labourer guarded the well. He staggered towards Harry. “Eh,” he cried, “get away, boy. I’ll put my boots to your backside.” Harry charged. His sixty-five pounds were enough to knock the drunk off his feet. The man struggled to get up, unable to coordinate his hands and his legs.

A rope still dangled in the well, forgotten, and although Harry didn’t know if it was long enough to reach the bottom, he took a chance and lowered himself into the darkness. The rope terminated on the well’s floor where the Boerboel was in a frenzy of pain. It lashed at Harry, bit hard into his arm. He tied it by its blood-streaked belly, pulled himself back up then gathered the rope and, with the dog barking its bedlam, lifted it out of the well.

The drunk, who still lay on the dusty ground, rained a violence of words on Harry. The sight of the dog’s broken legs and bent spine did not move him to remorse or pity. “That bitch will be dead in a week,” he spat at Harry. “The jackals will get it. Or the hyenas.”

But the Boerboel outlived the drunk by twelve years. With its hopping gait, it became Harry’s companion. He never had a better friend.

4

As soon as he could escape, Harry took a job as a boilermaker’s apprentice. He moved to Cape Town. He took a job at a shipyard and he traversed town daily to get from his boarding house to Table Bay Harbour where the boiler’s stack he worked under poured black into a green-blue sea. In Mouille Point, near the promenade that he passed en route to work, there was an estate where he became aware of a curious woman. Mouille Point was in the rich part of town and Harry preferred to walk through it, although his detour added time to his travels and his cheap suit made him invisible. No one said “Hello” to a man in a threadbare, oil-stained suit. But one day a woman stood at the edge of an expensive property leaning on a wrought iron fence. She was young and had a slightly bent spine. Their eyes found something recognizable in each other. He nodded and, to his surprise, she nodded back. Sometime later he said, “Good morning,” and she replied, “Good morning to you,” and smiled. It became a daily ritual. From the first day they acknowledged each other, the woman never seemed to leave her yard. One time she gestured to the house, her hand pointing down the travertine garden path to the limestone structure behind. He didn’t understand. He thought it was an English thing. He replied the only way he could. For

a week he scoured the market for something small, something exotic. He found it at last in a glassblower's wares, a small animal standing on four long legs.

He thought it was a poor design, an antelope crippled by art. "What is it?" he asked the storekeeper.

"A deer."

"What kind of deer?"

"Canadian."

He was drawn to it, loved it for its imperfections. When he found the courage, he stopped by the estate in Mouille Point. She was waiting, of course, but her purpose was mysterious. He cleared his throat. "My name..." he paused, unsure of himself.

She turned her head sideways. "Your name?"

"I was saying..."

"Yes. *You* were saying."

"My name was Harry Short." He corrected himself: "My name is Harry Short. I thought I should tell you that."

"Did you? Well, Harry Short, my name is Margaret Roll."

She held out her hand. He shoved the glass deer in her hand. It was wrapped in a frayed handkerchief.

"For you," he stammered then fled. The last thing he heard as he crossed the street was, "Thank you, Harry Short. It's very strange and I like it."

It was two weeks before he had the courage to return. She was standing by the fence. A fierce man, no doubt her father, stood nearby. "Hello, Harry," she whispered.

In December, Harry was downtown in the Grand Parade—the market square and the scene of soapbox rants and demonstrations—when he heard voices in the shadows across the street, the laughter of two violent men. The larger man, the most brutish, limped a crazy pantomime while bent over as though tying his shoe. His friend guffawed. Harry moved closer. The venue drew light as a stern, well-tailored man left the oculist's on the corner.

"You there," he said, "What are you up to?"

"Ah, Dr. Roll. Good evening to you. I'm just...admiring your lovely daughter."

“You leave my daughter alone.”

Harry knew Dr. Roll by sight, having seen him with his daughter. He approached at speed, saw Margaret at last, bent with a posture of defeat under an unlit gas lamp. The men had been ridiculing her while her father was being fitted.

Harry had no plan. He strode up to the larger man, who'd noticed his approach at last and challenged him. “What do you want?” Harry was not a big man; he was wiry and determined. With his first punch he took out two of the man's front teeth. His second punch was to the gut. The man swung back and knocked Harry into the street. He got up. They were ready for each other now, both furious. The father was a flurry of educated outrage. He grabbed his daughter's arm, “Come on. Leave these thugs to fight with each other.”

“But, don't you see...”

“Now!” he pulled her arm sharply, and she jerked and yelped in pain.

“Oh! Father, that hurts.”

“Come on, then.”

The fist fight raged long after they were gone. Harry might have beaten the bigger man, but he couldn't beat both of the men. They left him bloodied and battered on the street.

He did not set foot in Mouille Point until the swelling subsided. It was okay to wear bruises at the shipyard, but not on the edge of Margaret's yard. While he waited to recover, his life held in a suspension of misery, he heard a strange rumour. There was war in the air. Jameson, the Administrator of Southern Rhodesia—a persuasive man with a big head and dark, penetrating eyes—was recruiting a private army of policemen to quell an insurrection of his own design. Harry thought about the doctor, imagined himself through his eyes—a thug like any other thug.

When he did return she was still there. He told Margaret his plan and she said nothing. He wondered what she had heard. The day before he left, he met her again at the fence that edged her yard. “I leave tomorrow. I don't know what will happen.”

She grabbed his hands. She pulled him close. Then she held his face in her hands. “Do not die,” she said, which sounded like “I love you.”

Fifteen years later, on the boat to Canada, Harry pulls the letter from his wallet. He has always kept it, never showing it to Margaret. For years he has known he never will show her. He reads, “Whenever a smile lifts you and you don't know why, that will be my spirit caressing your heart. Because when all the joys are revealed, you will still be my greatest joy.” And he marvels at his penmanship. The words are clear, the cursive steady. He wonders whether he should throw the page into the water.

They made a bad marriage.

The day after their wedding, three months after Harry was ransomed back to the English (who miraculously agreed to pay for his release), Margaret threw away her father's girdle and grew decidedly crooked. She was a small woman with a fierce temper. She despised the poverty into which she had married, expected Harry to seek assistance from her family, but he was too proud. She could not forgive him. She never imagined that he would be so idiotic as to marry her for herself and not for her inheritance.

Their four children, Thomas, Ruth, Nan and Persis, were drawn to and doted on Harry. He played games with them.

When he grew ill with a tropical fever, the children prayed for his recovery. When his doctor prescribed a colder climate—Winnipeg—Margaret prayed for his death. She would follow with the children, although she was reluctant to make the trip, and her family had tried to dissuade her from going. She would go, but she would never let him forget.

And he won't.

Alone on deck in a cool breeze, Harry wonders at the letter. Black smoke tumbles from the boilers' stack and blows about the after house. The distant white clouds spilling off the Table Mountain to the stern—tablecloths, they're called—are the passing witnesses of a former life. And he wonders at the sergeant's poem. What does it mean "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield?" If it means burying the past, he will not do that. Maybe he has never been loved romantically. Maybe that's the truth of his history, that his marriage has been a secret negotiation, Margaret's part no more sincere than the sincerity one feels when signing a will. But that's only half of his history.

He has loved romantically. Harry William Peters Short has loved Margaret Roll. Whatever the past means, it means that, too.

He puts the letter in his pocket. Later he keeps it in a metal cigarette case. Five years later when he leaves Margaret to explore the battlefields of Europe it survives Ypres intact. It investigates Mont Sorrel. It explores the Somme.

And Margaret never knows of its existence, never knows she was so powerfully, so imaginatively loved. She outlives Harry by eleven years, strangers to each other's purpose, feeling her whole life was stolen from her by two heartless men.